

**Novas & velhas tendências**  
no cinema português contemporâneo

## ENSAIOS



### Sassetti: Music is part of a movie's soul

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Bernardo Sassetti, a well-known Portuguese jazz musician, is one of the most sought out composers in Portuguese film today. Since his brief appearance as part of the Guy Barker's Napoli Jazz Septet in Anthony Minghela's 1999 film *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, he has been writing an average of one film score per year. His music often contains catchy melodies and uses dynamic variations as a mean to punctuate onscreen action. His narrative skills have become a trademark for the composer and the reason for his success. Is Portuguese film music going back to the transparent "follow the action" formula that was so common in the 1940's?

The main question is not, like Frank Zappa eluded in the 1970's, "does humor belong in music?" but one cannot stop thinking about the co-relation between story and film score in terms of setting the mood of a feature film.

In the Golden Days of Hollywood and transparent editing, the question was simple: the role of the composer on a feature film was to punctuate the action using catching melodies and powerful dynamics. The car chases, shootouts or final confrontations between protagonist and antagonist were often accentuated by counterpoints and upbeat *fortissimos*, while romantic settings were enveloped by catchy melodies and mystery scenes dwelled on the atonal.

Of course there were and are still exceptions, but at a time when storytelling was being questioned, cinematography experimented new formats, and special effects were becoming increasingly (un)real, Music remained one of the most reliable pillars on which the story and the ambiance of the movie could rely.

That is, until Music was something else. Something less that could mean something increasingly more. In 1961, Ingmar Bergman premiered *Through a Glass Darkly*, the first part of the God and Man trilogy. This work is a turning point in Bergman's films, as the music moves away from its original function to intensify emotional moments, hence becoming an element requiring sustained attention. On this particular film, this takes place in the form of J.S. Bach's Sarabande from Cello Suite nr 2. It appears four times. And as we notice that apart from that all the film music has completely disappeared, we realize that the author was trying to obtain a new form of soundtrack where music is the punctuation of silence. For that purpose he recurred to a system

that soon would become known as his Musical Quotations<sup>1</sup>. The intent was simple: Bergman wanted to show the world his passion for Music and, at the same time, thought he could create a kind of collective memory on film, using classical masterpieces that everyone might have heard here and there along their lives. This particular combination of classical pieces and the use of contrast between sound and silence helped to create a new form of music score that communicated all the aesthetic and narrative intentions of each of Bergman's films.

At this point it will be important to briefly introduce the concept of narrative. There are two definitions that are unequivocally pertinent. For David Bordwell, a narrative is "a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space"<sup>1</sup>. For Claude Bremond, who considers the main character the pivotal figure in storytelling, "all narrative consists of a discourse which integrates a sequence of events of human interest into the unity of a single plot"<sup>1</sup>.

Music has been a part of films even before sound and it has always had its role set on two pillars: its narrative role linked to the storytelling itself, and as a means of creating a particular atmosphere, hence by linking period music to a particular period in time, or linking ethnic or ethnic-related music to actions taken on a particular place. This particular form of narrative music seems to be in the root of modern music scoring and musical consulting. The principle is quite simple and merges the two principles brought up before. Modern film scoring mixes the principle of accentuating emotions on the screen by inferring strong dynamic and rhythmic variations with the search for melodic forms that rely on audiences' collective memories or transport them to a particular state of mind. When one hears the Overture from *Lawrence of Arabia*, one is embedded by two different concomitant emotions: the illusion of grandeur suggested by the powerful one hundred piece orchestra arrangement and the exact metric of the tempo marked by timpani in Fortissimo, and what Maurice Jarre calls the *Main Theme*, a powerful melodic theme whose variations in tempo and dynamics remind us that the main character's strength is taunted by emotional frailty.

On Mikis Theodorakis score for Jules Dassin's *Never on Sunday*, the audiences hear a piece of rembetiko music while under the opening credits we see people laughing, swimming, working on ships. It is an audiovisual portrait of the apparent carefree life at the port of Piraeus. This is definitely Greece. And this is the idyllic vision that we have at first sight, the same that the American character Homer Thrace finds. Musically, the audience is not only in sync with the scenery but with the main character, a foreigner, like us, returning to his Greek origins. Being extradiegetic, the film also presents the point of view of the female character Ilya (played by Melina Mercouri), a beautiful prostitute that has trouble dealing with reality. After committing to the big change, there is a nostalgic moment in the film, where Ilya, missing her old carefree life, opens a box of memories and sings one of the most popular songs in film history, the Academy Award Winning *Children of Piraeus*.

Danish film theorist Birger Langkjær once wrote that "music is not a symbolic stand-in for something else, but rather a formal structure, which receives meaning through the power of something else, which the listener brings with him in the shape of gestalt-like schematics that, through the listener's metaphoric projection, adds expressive qualities to the music, and thereby makes the music understandable"<sup>1</sup>. And yet is it possible to listen to Theodoraki's soundtrack and imagine that the action is set in Alaska or Tokyo?

Gabriel Yared's score of *37° le Matin* operates on a slightly different principle. At the beginning of the film we listen to *Betty et Zorg*, a saxophone driven theme that reminds us a little of Dollar Brand/Archie Shepp's *Moniebah* and that serves the purpose of introducing the audience to these two characters. Two free lovers that have a terrible problem: Betty is bipolar. All through the entire movie, Gabriel Yared, the composer, mutates this initial nostalgic melody in a way that is possible to feel every up and down of this unstable relationship. To do this, Yared simply works in terms of arrangement, from a simple piano solo to a small-synthesized orchestra.

After seeing and listening to these examples, we realize that Music has become important not only as a tool for creating moods and atmospheres, but also as a powerful tool to organize narrative thinking. George Lucas often refers to the script of *American Graffiti* as something that he put together by listening to a stack of 50's rock n' roll 45-RPM records, the same tracks made it to the final cut and made *American Graffiti* one of the most popular soundtracks of all time.

In France, Jazz was always popular. In the 50's, it became even more popular with the visit of innumerable jazz musicians and the first big European tours that were anchored there. When the Nouvelle Vague was born, almost every soundtrack was filled with Jazz, normally used as a counterpoint of the action ( Jean-Luc Godard's *À Bout de Souffle*) but also as part of the setting (Agnès Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7*) or just to create dramatic tension by trying new forms. That was certainly the case of Louis Malle's *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud*, a film that became a success due to Jeanne Moureau's performance and a powerful film score written by Miles Davis.

In terms of film music, France has always been a reference, especially since the 1960's, a fact that cannot be dissociated from the popularity of Jazz in the late 50's.

Claude Lelouch, a French director that has always worked independently and decisively stayed outside any known movements (including the Nouvelle Vague), is widely known to have all his music recorded before the film shoot begins.

Michel Legrand, Francis Lai and Maurice Jarre are three of the biggest names in the French film industry; they all won Academy Awards for films made in the USA and they all wrote catchy melodies that the audience easily linked to one particular movie. They also wrote memorable film songs like *The Windmills of Your Mind* (Michel Le Grand for Norman Jewison's *The Thomas Crown Affair*), *Lara's Theme* (Maurice Jarre for David Lean's *Dr. Zhivago*) or *Love Story Theme* (Francis Lai for Arthur Hiller's *Love Story*).

In Portugal, from the 1930's through 50's, film music was clearly inspired on the Hollywood model, with classical trained musicians that frequently worked for the existing industry. Musicians like Frederico de Freitas (Francisco Ribeiro's *O Pátio das Cantigas*), Raul Ferrão (*A Aldeia da Roupa Branca*) or Jaime Lopes (*O Leão da Estrela*, *O Costa do Castelo*) produced melodies and songs that stayed on the collective memory of moviegoers, even in those who never saw those films but on television. The editing was transparent, the plot was quite simple, structured in three acts and the characters were social stereotypes. The idea was to allow people to see themselves in a nice upgraded way. This was useful in a country that lived under a dictatorship. There were no Portuguese film noir, and Italian neo-realism was badly mutilated. The truth was as politically distorted as a soviet propaganda film with a twist. Music ruled this micro cosmos. If someone would analyze Portugal through these movies, one would say that these were probably the most musical people on earth. All because almost all popular films of that period made in Portugal were...musicals. Music was so important those days that, when Cottinelli Telmo directed *Aldeia da Roupa Branca*, Portugal's first talking picture, the producer João Ortigão Ramos hired four composers (René Bohet, Raul Ferrão, Raúl Portela and Jaime Silva Filho) to assure music was one of its biggest assets. Needless to say, it worked. The film was a huge popular success and so was its music. Recordings and printed scores were sold in large numbers and composers were duly compensated. The industry seemed to work. Did it indeed?

There was never a huge film industry and as the movie spectators began to have other forms of entertainment, namely with the advent of television, the big productions began to close and at the same time Music stopped being one of the narrative pillars in Portuguese Cinema. At first, one can say it was due to economic reasons. It was the end of an era, the era of big productions, of film as entertainment for the masses. Money was running short and new languages in film were starting to appear. Conventions were being broken. Classical was going out of style. In France it was being replaced by the Nouvelle Vague, whereas in Portugal movies were

beginning to have an authorial voice. Those were the times of revolutionary language in film, just before the 1974 Revolution. Cinema Novo, an independent film movement in the 1960's, released its first films. Production companies worked on very tight budgets and wanted to break all narrative conventions of classical storytelling. This paved way to years of incomprehensible plots, uncomfortable silences and atonal arrhythmic music scores. Luckily there were exceptions, original material made by exceptional composers who worked on micro budgets (Carlos Paredes' soundtrack for Paulo Rochas's *Verdes Anos*) or the use of pre-recorded music selected by music loving directors like João César Monteiro, who produced skillful music quotations that were able to serve the same purpose as Bergman's in a completely distinct context. One of the best examples can be heard at the end of his last film *Vai e Vem*, where the use of Breton's *Habanera Concertante* fills all the narrative gaps its ending might have had.

Nowadays, film production is changing. Some will say not fast enough. Since the 1960's, every film made in Portugal has been 100% subsidized. The turning point, although yet not very clear, has come with the timid introduction of private funding. The purpose of this piece is not to comment on this new situation. However, what we can clearly see is that some of the movies made afterward had more money put in postproduction. This clearly means there is more money to invest in the soundtrack. If this is going to have a direct effect on the quality of the music, only time will tell. Today reality tells us that it is impossible to live off this activity, even if you are a top quality composer.

Bernardo Sassetti is one of the most sought up composers in Portuguese Cinema. At age 39, his musical career started more than 20 years ago. He is widely known as an eminent pianist and a skilled Jazz composer. He is also recognized for performing many duets with some well-known celebrities, locally and internationally. His passion for music and composition led him to produce music for the cinema. Sassetti said in innumerable interviews that the cinema fascinated him, as such elements as image, color and the face of the characters are needed to compose the music. Of course other things are needed. On the subject of the obvious differences between Hollywood and Portugal, there is a world of differences not all related to the power of money, although the investment is a big part of the equation. According to the composer, in the U.S., as far as sound and music is concerned, the industry has always been aware of the benefits of being in the vanguard both technically and artistically. Moreover, there was always an extreme dedication by the producers. Art is entertainment, and through this perspective, Americans have been outstanding from the time of the great Busby Berkeley musicals, shows and vaudeville, to the golden age of cinema. The great European composers always found a safe haven there. In Portugal, there really isn't a tradition of composing music for the screen. It has always been a quite dispersed mean of artistic collaboration that feeds on individualism and depends on the relationship between director and composer. And there is another big difference: in the big cities and in the major movie studios, musicians are like a big family. For each film project, musicians gather opinion both from producer and director, and then work as a team with usually a musical director, two or three musical advisors, a music editor, one or two mixing technicians, someone who is responsible for the time code and spotting, a composer, several arrangers and as many copyists as needed. It is a real company. In Portugal, the composer handles everything with the director, and he can count on technical support from one or two sound technicians. There is no film music production. There are only a few "attempts" that way.

To really understand the composition process in Portugal, one has to observe the relation between director and composer. According to Sassetti, the ideas always come up from a conversation with the director, away from the piano<sup>1</sup> \*. This is then followed by several screenings in the editing room before the first musical ideas. Those are worked individually, one or two compositions, arrangements, instrumentation. These steps are discussed with the director and when the Main Theme emerges, the one that sets the film's dramatic tone, Sassetti begins to write its variations and others that are circumstantial in nature. According to the composer, what is interesting for him in film music is not working according to the narrative action, but to create another dimension that can fit both fiction and the psychological traits of the main characters.

This way, music becomes transversal or non-linear, acquiring a key function that understands what lies beyond image. The composer then just needs time to absorb the most significant elements of the story. After that, music is born.

Some composers write musicals, others write entire musical scores before even the first shot is made. It seems undoubted that the process of synchronization of film music is always more interesting when the music is already recorded and mixed. The director may have more editing options this way. In musicals, due to the nature of the songs and choreography involved, the music, being very specific, must be recorded before. There is no alternative. The operatic film *Os Canibais* by Manoel de Oliveira (with music by João Paes) is a good example of this. On all remaining cases, the composer does not have this chance. The music is almost always composed in middle or advanced stage of production. In Portugal, according to Bernardo Sasseti, it gets to be humiliating when a producer calls asking for some film music at a time when the release date is scheduled for next month: "He finally remembered that the film needs music!". A conscientious producer (or director) should start thinking about the music, if not before, at least from the time the script is finished. The composer needs time to think about music. In Portugal, a finished script is rare, and according to Sasseti, it would almost be a miracle if the music was already written and recorded before the shooting.

Nevertheless, Bernardo Sasseti has been involved in many film compositions. If one picks two completely different projects out of his filmography, Margarida Cardoso's *A Costa dos Murmúrios*, and *Alice* by Marco Martins, analyzing both film scores, one has to wonder how different production conditions were. Interestingly enough, Sasseti remembers the input and the time of composition were exactly the same. According to him, "they gave me a few months to think about the music". In musical terms, however, there are quite a few differences. The score in *Costa dos Murmúrios* has an almost timeless feel, between dream and reality, as it follows the characters Evita and Helena. For this film, Sasseti recalls having imagined an ethereal music, as if hovering in time and space - a song without dramatic resolution. Ironically, this seems very appropriate as the film also delivers no dramatic resolution whatsoever.

One of the things that surfaces immediately when listening to *Alice*'s film score is its plastic coherence and its absolute solidity. According to Sasseti, the music circles around Mário's theme. Mário, the main character, is a father who lost his daughter, Alice - his obsession, his routine, and of course the memory of the child is represented by the long notes of a clarinet in crescendo and diminuendo. The piano notes underline the obsessive routine of Mario, the slow bass underlines his steps, the vibraphone pictures the feeling that Mário rises above the acts of indifference of people in the city. Alice's theme was written on a 7/4 measure, symbolizing the 7 days of the week and the routine of a father looking for his daughter. The plot has serious plausibility problems, the film has its fair share of redundant scenes, and yet it all comes together with music. If one doubts the unifying power of an inspired soundtrack, this would be the example to watch.

Is this the proof that there is a trend to try and obtain a classic narrative effect in movies, similar to the one used by the composers of the Classic American Cinema?

For Sasseti, the answer to these questions is inevitably connected to the way the American film considered (and in a way still does) music as an asset. There are no resources, no sense of financial viability or attitude to talk about music in Portuguese cinema. The major difference being the attitude, the desire to perceive that music can be a pole of emotions, a fundamental part of the soul of a movie. In a Portuguese production, music is always the first to suffer the consequences of budget shortcomings.

In terms of cost, it is possible to achieve great results with relatively small budgets. As Sasseti points out, a great orchestra does not necessarily make a good soundtrack. Sometimes it only takes him an instrument to tell all that is essential. In Europe, particularly in authorial cinema,

music is music and the word is the word. Therefore, as Bergman noticed early on, it is not necessary to underline the anxiety, sadness or any emotion that is already visible on the screen.

In terms of orchestral music for film, Sassetti chooses to work with a 40 piece ensemble. This lineup suits the music he writes. It's very balanced and provides a dynamic sound that allows exploring the themes in many ways. It can travel from the simple sound of a clarinet to a complicated tone variation causing a big dramatic increase. Everything depends on the interpretation and, very importantly, on how the sound is captured, the balance, the final mix and the overall mastering. All this calls out for investment, not necessarily funding as Europe, and especially Portugal can never compete with international budgets. Bernardo Sassetti recalls the days when he was collaborating in the film score of Anthony Minghella's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. "We spent several months with Guy Barker to compose themes inspired by the experience of living on location. We then recorded a live concert (that briefly appears in the movie) and subsequently presented the concert premiere of the movie in 8 capitals of the world. To give you an idea, the production budget for the debut session in Los Angeles itself (including catering) would be enough for the production of two or three films in Portugal or, better yet, 15 or 20 years of good Portuguese movie soundtracks."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Musical quotation can serve basically to intensify or foreshadow an emotional moment. When Martha gives birth in *Waiting Women*, her happiness is underlined by Gluck's *Dance of the Blessed Spirits*. On the opposite, sadness is expressed in *Music in Darkness*, when Bengt, the young blind man, successively plays Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* and a *Nocturne* by Chopin" Charlotte Renaud: *An unrequited love to music*; Ingmar Bergman Foundation.

<sup>1</sup> BORDWELL & THOMPSON (1979) *Film Art: An introduction*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979

<sup>1</sup> BREMOND, Claude (1966). *La logique des possibles narratifs*. In: *Communications* 8. Paris: Editions du Seuil

<sup>1</sup> LANGKJAER, Birger, "Den lyttende tilskuer : om musik, perception og følelser i audiovisuel fiktion", in *Norsk Medietidsskrift*. 1998 ; No. Årg. 5, No. 1, Oslo. p. 44. Trd. inglesa "The attentive spectator: the music, perception and emotions in audiovisual fiction", disponível em

<[http://www.filmmonthy.com/articles/2002/14\\_Aug---Film\\_Music\\_Outside\\_the\\_Narrative\\_part\\_One.asp](http://www.filmmonthy.com/articles/2002/14_Aug---Film_Music_Outside_the_Narrative_part_One.asp)>.

<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of the directors can not speak in musical terms. Everything is meaning and symbolism. One talks about what Music can add to the images. In this sense. In the movie *Quaresma*, more than words, the composer's inspiration came from the unforgettable gestures by the director José Álvaro Morais.